Soviet Frees 2 U.S. Fliers Despite Camera 'Evidence' of Spying

By Hans Schaefer

WIESBADEN, Germany, March 27 (UPI)—The Russians today released two American fliers captured when their RB-66 reconnaissance jet bomber was shot down in East Germany but said they had photographic evidence on which they could have tried the men as spies.

A Soviet statement distributed by the official Tass press agency said an examination of the wreckage showed that the plane had been used for military reconnaissance and that the fliers confirmed they were in radio contact with U.S. bases until they were shot down.

But the Russians said they had decided to free the two because the United States had expressed regrets and promised no more "transgressions" against Communist territory. The U.S. has denied all the Communist spy charges.

The two fliers were the pilot, Capt. David I. Holland, 35, of Holland, Minn., and Capt. Melvin J. Kessler, 30, a navigator-instructor, of Philadelphia.

All Three Hospitalized

The navigator, 1st Lt. Harold W. Welch, 24, of Detroit, was freed earlier and brought to the U.S. Air Force hospital here for treatment of a broken arm and leg. Holland and Kessler joined him in the hospital for checkups.

[In Johnson City, Texas, Press Secretary George Reedy said President Johnson was "gratified that the fliers have been released" and "pleased that this matter has been sensibly settled."

[In Washington Secretary of State Dean Rusk said at a news conference that he knew of no deals or conditions made to obtain the release. He reiterated that the plane was not on a spy mission and said the fliers would be questioned as to why they entered Red territory.]

Release of the fliers had been the subject of negotiations in Washington and Moscow since their aircraft was shot down by a Soviet fighter plane March 10.

The U.S., in demanding their release, warned the Russians that their continued detention would jeopardize a number of negotiations under way between the two countries.

Holland and Kessler appeared under obvious strain when they descended from the DC-4 transport that flew them to Wiesbaden from Helmstedt, where they crossed into West Germany from the East.

Neither U. S. nor Communist spokesmen in Germany revealed where Holland and Kessler had been held. But diplomatic sources said the U.S. military liaison mission at Potsdam, outside East Berlin, had apparently worked out the details of the release.

Woman opera singer freed by East Germans charges mistreatment.
Page A7.

President Johnson visits boyhood home in Texas.
Page A2.

The plane was shot down near the town of Magdeburg, several miles inside East Germany, and Welch was held in a Red Army prison until his release.

[According to the Associated Press, East Germany made the first announcement of the airmen's release. This was interpreted as an attempt to demonstrate a sovereignty that the Western allies do not recognize.

[The official East German press agency ADN issued a statement generally similar to that of the Russians. On the matter of U.S. regrets, ADN said: "The government of the United States of America has expressed its sorrow over this offense and has given assurances that Americans involved have received strict orders never again in the future to undertake offenses of this nature."

[As is usual in such cases the East Germans tried to demonstrate their sovereignty by saying the Russians had discussed the entire affair with them.]

Holland and Kessler entered Western territory in a U.S. Army sedan from the comparatively vacant East German autobahn and moved into massive holiday traffic on the Wesern side. A West German police car, its siren open, led the way from Helmstedt toward Hannover and the waiting DC-4.

A Soviet Army officer with a detail of troops saluted the Americans' sedan when it came roaring out of East Germany and into West Germany. Only rarely in recent years have Soviet troops appeared at the Communist Marienborn checkpoint opposite Helmstedt.

The fliers' wives were flown today from their home base at Toul-Rosieres, France, to Wiesbaden for a hospital reunion.

The fliers' return had been expected to follow immediately upon the return of Welch. Secretary Rusk announced Sunday that their release was imminent, but the Russians kept the fliers for almost another week.

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Air Force Capts. David I. Holland, left, and Melvin J. Kessler after being freed.